

Excerpt from **NAGRASANTI** by Theresa M. Moore, ©2018 all rights reserved.

The next morning, Megan woke suddenly, looked around and saw that Gandalf was already up. He sat in the window casement, watching the birds flutter about among the tree branches outside. She glanced at the small clock sitting on the bedstand and saw that it was already close to noon.

She rose quickly and dressed, fed Gandalf and then ventured out. It felt like the house was empty but that could have been her jangled nerves playing with her imagination. Again, the odd tingles crawling up her spine were inexplicable. Then the tingles stopped. It was strange the way the spells of terror and strangeness lingered even when there was no danger, and Megan could scarcely determine what was causing them.

She walked down the stairs into the living parlor, then through it into another room in search of someone to talk to. Now she was determined to learn more about the affliction striking the community.

She found herself in a large study lined with book shelves and furnished with a variety of comfortable furniture. There, she spotted the young knight, Robert standing near a small fireplace, reading something in his hand. It looked like a letter.

"Hello," she said as she approached him.

He turned and regarded her with a serious expression, then masked it with a quick smile. "Oh, hello."

"I think I overslept," she said. "The house is so quiet. Where has everyone gone?"

"Here and there. Errands, I expect." He approached her and stretched out his hand. It was cold and dry like the others' were. She found she was getting used to it now, even finding it pleasant.

Close up he did not look older than about twenty five, and he was quite handsome under the moustache. His curling golden brown hair was parted at one side and worn long over his ears and neck. It made him look a bit like King Arthur to Megan, who had seen many depictions over the years, and every bit like the English gentleman he was. He was wearing a brown quilted smoking jacket over an ivory turtleneck sweater and a pair of grey tweed trousers.

"I suppose now is not the time to ask, but what was all that about zero the other night?" she asked.

"Oh," he laughed. "That is because the last time we drew lots Lucien put a zero in the pot and no one drew it. Or so I was told. Quite frankly, I'm still not sure about it."

"On purpose?" Megan asked with a shy smile.

"Yes. You have to understand that we know each other's minds all too well, and sometimes we play strange tricks on each other. It serves to break the doldrums here, though now it seems there is never a dull moment anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, for one thing, you are still here. I thought you would have panicked and asked to go home once you found out what we are, but instead you chose to stay. Stalwart thinking, if you ask me," he said with a charming toothy grin.

Megan managed a smile back. "I almost did, but I could not call myself a journalist if I ran away every time something strange happened, could I?"

"Quite so. And second, this breakdown effect has been playing havoc with the locals. We've had more cases springing up rather suddenly in the middle of the night. Damned irregular. What is your impression?"

"I really don't know," Megan said. "Lucien has said it is difficult to identify, and may have more to do with medicine than with a contagion. Do you have any ideas?"

"Not a clue," Robert declared. "I'll leave that to the experts. I have not felt a thing myself, mind you, but I'm not going to stand around and worry about it. If it happens, I dare say I'll face it the way I've had to face everything else in my life. Head on. If I can't handle a bit of sadness now and again I could not call myself a man."

"I realize that you have not been called in turn, but I don't suppose you could spare me some time to tell me about it?" Megan asked.

"My life?" he said with a short wave of his hand. "Oh, that could take days."

She ventured to ask, "what's that in your hand?"

He glanced down. "It's a letter from my mother. She died centuries ago. I found it between the pages of a book I'd been looking for that I had stored in an old trunk. I finally found the will to burn it and say goodbye to the past."

"It seems to me you'd want to hang on to something like that for posterity," Megan said. "After all, she was your mother."

He gazed off into the distance as he replied. "I adored her, with every fiber of my heart and soul. But I also hung on to her memory for so long that I could not move on in peace. This is a bit of a farewell ritual. I'm ready for new things. I can't stay in one place for too long, you see. I'm a bit of a nomad by heart. Still, it's ironic. I've stayed here at Nagrasanti for almost two centuries without wanting to leave the place once. Jane understood."

"Jane is... was your girlfriend?"

"She was my last wife, and the light of my life," he replied softly. "But she's been dead for over twenty years."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Megan said. She glanced down and noticed that he was still wearing his wedding ring, a solid gold band.

He looked down at her and smiled. "Don't be. She's not dead to me as long as I remember her." Then he glanced down at the letter in his hand and added, "perhaps you're right. I should hang on to this. It's been a keepsake so long I think it can stay a bit longer."

He folded the brittle vellum and stuffed it into the pocket of his smoking jacket. After a long pause for reflection, he said, "now. Where shall I start? Have you had breakfast yet?"

"No," Megan said. "I'm not really hungry. But I am eager to hear your story. Do you want to take me home, or -- I mean..." She blushed and smiled. "Sorry, that didn't come out right."

To her relief Robert chuckled. "I know what you meant. We can talk right here if you'd like. My life is an open book now, compared with Michael, who still feels he has to keep everything a secret. He doesn't have to, really, but for him old habits die hard. We understand that he still feels terribly ashamed about what happened to Lori. It was not his fault yet he still blames himself for it."

"After he told me some of his story I can see why," Megan said. "He had to make some difficult choices, and some of them were beyond his control. It's just... I feel sorry for him. He seems like a nice man. Too nice to be alone and isolated."

Robert smiled down at her. "I'm glad you understand. Come. Let's get comfortable. I'll find you something to drink, shall I? and then I'll regale you with my circumstances."